

Possible Bioterrorism Incident

Disease Fact Sheet Series

What is a possible bioterrorism incident?

A bioterrorism incident is an event during which an infectious or chemical agent has been used to threaten harm to an individual(s). For example, this may occur when a person receives a letter labeled with or mentioning the name of a possible bioterrorist chemical or biologic agent (e.g. *anthrax*) or a telephone caller threatens to use such an agent as a weapon. Use or threatened use of any chemical or biologic agent as a weapon is a federal crime and will be thoroughly investigated and prosecuted by the FBI and police departments.

How likely is it that I have actually been exposed to a bioterrorism agent?

To date all such previously known incidents in Wisconsin have been hoaxes. Even when we suspect that an event is a hoax, we'll take all necessary steps to evaluate the incident and assure your safety.

What will be done to evaluate this incident?

State and local public health, emergency and law enforcement agencies will work together to evaluate this incident. They will determine whether you have been exposed to a real chemical or biologic agent which could cause disease. This will be done by examining the circumstances of the incident, the suspect material, and the type of exposure that you may have received.

When will I know if I have been exposed to a hazardous biologic agent?

Because different organisms and toxins may be used as bioterrorism agents, the suspect material must be collected for laboratory testing. These tests will be able to identify the presence of hazardous biologic agents or toxins in approximately 24-48 hours. For some agents preliminary results may be available within 4-6 hours of initiation of laboratory processing. The results will be discussed with all exposed persons as soon as they are available.

Do I need to decontaminate myself, or throw away my clothes and belongings?

Emergency personnel should have already instructed you to wash your hands and any other part of your body in contact with the suspect material with soap and water. In some cases, a dilute solution of bleach will also be used to decontaminate you and/or your clothing. Unless specifically instructed to do so, you do not need to perform other decontamination procedures or discard your belongings. If necessary, emergency personnel will perform decontamination of the environment in which the suspect material was found.

Do I need any treatment now, such as antibiotics or vaccines?

To date the vast majority of incidents have not required any preventive treatment. Even in the unlikely event that this is not a hoax, your risk of becoming ill generally is very small. Should the laboratory tests on the suspect material indicate that you truly have been exposed to a biologic agent, there are medications that you can take to prevent you from becoming ill. Results of the tests will be back in time for you to receive preventive treatment. The results of the laboratory tests are needed to make the best possible recommendations.

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Am I a risk to my family? Can I spread anything?

Most of the diseases caused by bioterrorist agents (e.g., *anthrax*) are NOT contagious from person to person. Even in the likely event that you truly have been exposed to a contagious agent of bioterrorism, you would have to become ill yourself to be able to spread the agent to another person. Results of the laboratory tests on the suspect material will be available in time for you to take appropriate measures to prevent you from spreading anything to your family.

What should I do now?

You must complete the Wisconsin Health Data Collection Form before you leave the site of the incident. This is so we will know how to contact you with the results of our investigation. After emergency personnel authorize you to leave, you may continue your usual activities at work or home. It is not necessary for you to visit a hospital or doctor's office. If you wish to contact your private physician to discuss your possible exposure, please feel free to do so. As a precaution, we recommend that you take your temperature daily to watch for fever.

What should I do if I develop any signs or symptoms of illness before the results of laboratory tests are ready?

If you should develop any symptoms or a fever (greater than a 100.0°F), please immediately contact your doctor; you and/or your doctor should also contact medical staff at the Wisconsin Division of Public Health, Bureau of Communicable Disease at (608) 267-7321 (or (608) 258-0099 after hours). We will make recommendations to you and your health care providers regarding how to best evaluate and treat your symptoms based on the circumstances of the exposure.

When will it be safe for me to return to this building?

Emergency and public health agencies will notify building managers regarding when it is safe to reopen the building in question. If you work in this building, you're supervisor will then contact you when it is safe to return. Most biologic agents do NOT stay in a building for prolonged periods of time and continue to cause disease.

Who can my doctor or I contact if we have questions?

If you or your physicians have medical questions about your possible exposure, please contact the medical staff at the Wisconsin Division of Public Health, Bureau of Communicable Disease at:

During normal business hours: (608) 267-7321
During nights, weekends, or holidays (608) 258-0099

Should you become ill, exhibit cold or flu like symptoms in the next 48-72 hours you should do the following:

- Proceed immediately to the emergency department at _____ hospital and inform them you have potentially been exposed to _____
- Contact the _____ Health Department at _____
- Should you have any additional questions please contact _____ at _____.